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ON THE  
RADICAL LETTERS  
OF  
THE PELASGIANS  
AND THEIR DERIVATIVES.

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Read at the SOCIETY of ANTIQUARIES, Jan. 13, 1785.

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*ON the radical Letters of the Pelasgians and their derivatives. By Thomas Astle, Esq.*

**A** KNOWLEDGE of the radical letters of any language, is the surest means of obtaining information respecting the sounds of which such language was composed, and of the state of it when these radical letters only were used. This will best enable us to recover those which have been for many ages so intirely neglected as to be in a manner effaced. The utility which results from a distinction of the radical letters of such languages from their derivatives is too obvious to need any illustration; the separation of the one from the other, will assist in forming a right judgment of the age and authenticity of coins, inscriptions, and other ancient documents, and will be of the greatest use in distinguishing such as are genuine from those which are spurious. The Pelasgian language and letters had been so intirely neglected and disused for so long a period of time before the restoration of science in the fifteenth century, that they were in a manner as much unknown as if they had never existed, although they had been used in all the extensive countries settled by the Pelasgi and their descendents, as well in Asia as in Europe, who for many ages wrote from right to left, till their alphabet was improved by the *Ionians*, who reversing their letters, wrote from left to right, and in process of time their method of writing was universally adopted in Europe, and in some parts of Asia.



I CONCEIVE I have elsewhere proved, that the Pelasgi derived their letters from the Phenicians, and that these Pelasgi were of Phenician original [a]. They were certainly the most ancient inhabitants of Greece of whom we have any account. The Phenician Pelasgi settled colonies in several islands of the Ægean sea, as Samothrace, Lemnos, Imbrus, and Scyros. They also spread themselves, not only on the maritime, but in the inland parts of Greece, in Attica, Thessaly, all the old Hellas, Argolis, and all over the Peloponnese; and several colonies of them particularly from Lydia, Lemnos, Imbrus, Thessaly, and Arcadia, settled in different parts of Italy, and possessed themselves of the greatest part of that country, where of course they carried their language and letters.

SOLINUS POLYHISTOR relates, that the Greek colonies who settled in Italy were *Aborigines, Aurunci, Pelasgi, Arcades, Siculi*; and Pliny says [b], they were *Aborigines, Pelasgi, Arcades, Siculi, Aurunci, Rutuli, Osci, Volsci, and Ausones*. All these colonists wrote in the Pelasgian manner, from right to left, till the reign of Tarquinius Priscus, the fifth king of the Romans, who began to reign five hundred and sixty-five years before Christ; though the Samnites continued to write in the ancient manner so late as two hundred and thirty years before the Christian æra, as appears by their coins and inscriptions. The Pelasgi who settled in Etruria were called Etruscans; the monuments discovered in that country, as also in *Umbria*, and in the other parts of Italy settled by the early colonies of the Pelasgi, afford us the best information concerning the Pelasgian language and characters.

THE five tables discovered at Eugubium, a city of *Umbria*, in the year 1456, are of very high antiquity; and father Gori,

[a] Origin and Progress of Writing, chap. iv. p. 51, & seq.

[b] Hist. Nat. lib. iii. cap. 5.



with great strength of argument, labours to prove, that they were written two centuries before the Trojan war. However, they are certainly written in the Pelasgian language, and in characters similar to those found on several Etruscan monuments preserved by *Dempster, Gori, Passer*, and others [c].

THE alphabet which the *Pelasgi* first brought into Italy, and which has been called their original alphabet, was probably carried out of Phenicia before the Phenicians themselves had augmented the number of radical letters, of which it was originally composed. This alphabet consisted of *thirteen* letters according to Dr. Swinton; but, according to father Gori, who appears to have been better informed, the original alphabet consisted only of *twelve* letters. As these authors differ materially it may be proper to give both alphabets.

According to Dr. Swinton.

A	A
E	E
V. 8. 8. J	F
H	H
I	I
K	K
L	L
M	M
N	N
P	P
R	R
S	S
T	T

According to Father Gori.

A	A
E	E
I	I
K	K
L	L
M	M
N	N
P	P
R	R
S	S
T	T
V	V

[c] Two other tables were found at the same time, written in Roman letters, but these do not relate to the present subject.



FATHER GORI tells us, that the *Hra* was afterwards added; and he also shews that the double and aspirated letters  $\Theta$ ,  $\Xi$ ,  $\Phi$  and  $\chi$ , were admitted among the later Etruscans. The double letters were not originally members of the Pelasgian alphabet: though, as they appear on Etruscan monuments, we may conclude they existed before the time of Palamedes, who is said to have invented them about twenty years before the taking of Troy, or 1164 years before Christ.

FROM the above alphabets we discover, that the Pelasgi had too few original letters to express distinctly the several sounds of their language; they were therefore under the necessity of annexing several sounds to one and the same letter; but, as they improved their language, they as well as the Greeks, added other characters, significant of the sounds thereof.

THE letters  $\Gamma$ ,  $\Delta$ ,  $\Sigma$ ,  $\Theta$ ,  $\Upsilon$ , or  $\Omega$ , were not originally in the Pelasgian alphabet; neither are the letters  $\Gamma$ ,  $\Delta$ ,  $\Sigma$ ,  $\Theta$ , nor the  $\Omega$ , or any of the double letters to be found on the Eugubian tables [*d*], nor on the stone in the Oscan language, some years since discovered at Abella [*e*], which is evidently of much later date than the Eugubian tables. It is true, that a character in form similar to the  $\Upsilon$  (thus  $\bar{\Upsilon}$ ) had then obtained a place in the Oscan alphabet, in which it had sometimes the power of the Æolic digamma, or the V consonant, and occasionally that of the O, if we may credit Gebelin.

THE B had not obtained its proper form when the Eugubian tables were written, nor doth it occur in the Sigeian inscription. Its sound seems to have been conveyed by the  $\gamma$ ,  $\beta$ , or the Æolic

[*d*] A letter like the Ionic theta  $\Theta$  is found on these tables, but it has the power of the aspirate H.

[*e*] A city of Campania near Nola in Italy, and published at Rome in 1774, with notes by J. B. Passer. See more concerning this inscription in Gebelin's *Monde Primitif*, vol. IV. p. 216, et seq.

digamma;



digamma; but it afterwards obtained the sound of the augmented  $\Pi$ , its parent character [*f*].

THE  $\Gamma$  is the K diminished, and was formerly represented by the half of that character thus  $\lvert$ , as appears on a bronze lately found in Calabria, which is supposed to have been made five hundred years before Christ [*g*]. I find that the  $\Gamma$  was frequently supplied by the K in ancient documents, particularly in the Sigeon inscription where  $\Sigma\lvert\vee\zeta$  or  $\Sigma\vee\kappa\epsilon$  is written for  $\Sigma\iota\gamma\epsilon\iota$ . This inscription is in the Æolic dialect and was written in the five hundred and ninety-fourth year before Christ.

THE  $\Delta$  is derived from the T, which supplied its place till the former character was admitted into the Greek alphabet, as appears by the Oscan inscription abovementioned, and by other ancient documents.

IN times of very remote antiquity the Greeks had not a sufficient number of letters for the notation of their language. A character somewhat like the  $\Delta$  seems to have supplied the place of the Z. On a medal struck at Zancle (now Messina), about the 28th Olympiad, it is written  $\Delta\text{ANK}\Lambda\epsilon$ ; and the same character is observable on the shield of *Anaxidamus*, the son of *Zeuxidamus*, which is nearly of the same date, and is written thus  $\Delta\epsilon\tau\kappa\epsilon\iota\Delta\alpha\mu\omicron$ . The character like the  $\Delta$  was sometimes converted into the P, for the ancient Greeks sometimes wrote  $\text{PE}\tau\kappa\epsilon\iota\Delta\alpha\mu\omicron\varsigma$  and  $\text{PANK}\Lambda\epsilon$ . This shews the uncertainty of writing before the ancient Greeks had polished their language [*b*], although I find that the  $\Sigma$  and the  $\Delta$  united some-

[*f*] Mr. Chishull supposes, that the  $\pi$  was the B diminished, whereas the latter is the  $\Pi$  augmented.

[*g*] This Bronze is preserved in the Borgian Museum at Velletria, and was communicated to me by the learned *S. Borgia*, Sec. Congreg. de propaganda Fide &c.

[*b*] See D'Hancarville's *Recherches sur l'origine, l'esprit, et les progres des arts de la Grece*. Vol. II. plate XXI. London 1785, 4to.



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times supplied the place of the Z, yet I conceive this letter to be only the Σ augmented; for in early times its sound was conveyed by ΣΣ, though some have deduced it from the Phenician Zain: but this character was not used by the Pelasgi. The zeta in its present form doth not appear in the *Marmor Sandwicense*, which was written at the end of the 101st Olympiad, or three hundred and forty-four years before Christ, nor in several of the ancient inscriptions preserved by Chishull, who says that its ancient form was thus  $\Xi$  [b].

THE  $\Xi$ , H or E long, sounded as an aspirate, is said to have been introduced into the Greek alphabet by *Simonides*; but it appears, by the Eugubian tables, and other ancient monuments, that it was admitted before his time. The literati have disputed whether the H should be admitted as a letter, or be esteemed only as a mere sign, or note of aspiration. Varro, and many who have followed him, consider it only as an aspirate. It is certainly of high antiquity, for we find it in the ancient Phenician and Hebrew alphabets. Plato in his *Cratylus* truly says, that the Athenians anciently wrote E and not H: his words are Οὐ γὰρ Η ἐχρώμεθα, ἀλλὰ Ε το παλαιόν; though it is certain that this character had different powers [i].

THE Pelasgian  $\chi$  or F, was undoubtedly derived from the Phenician *Vau*, and was at first supplied by the V, and when it was used as an aspirate, it was inverted thus  $\chi$ , I conceive it to be the parent of the Greek  $\phi$ , because it is found on the coins of the *Bastuli* who were Phenicians, on the Eugubian tables, and on the most ancient Etruscan monuments, long before the Greek  $\phi$  was used. These testimonies might induce Dr. Swinton to consider the  $\chi$  or F as one of the original characters of the primitive Etruscan alphabet; but father Gori does not allow

[b] See *Antiquitates Asiaticæ*, p. 50. 68. 98.

[i] See *Antiquitates Asiaticæ*, p. 20.



it to be such, and this letter was pronounced like the V, a palatal aspirate [k]. The use of it as a labial aspirate or Φ was of a later period, and the mode of pronouncing it with the lips and teeth, as now practised, is of a still later age.

THE Υ is derived from the Phenician *Vau*, sounded as the vowel U. It was introduced to soften the harshness of the V consonant; and afterwards the Greeks rendered it by the diphthong *ou*. The O is said to have been included in the Υ, but although this last character might convey the sound, yet I find the former was introduced into the Phenician alphabet long before the Υ, used as a vowel, appeared in its present form. It is in both the Sigeian inscriptions, and in the old cup mentioned by Achæus in Athenæus, on which was inscribed ΔΙΟΝΤΕΟ. In this word the Υ is distinguished from it, and here the last O is pronounced like *ou*, as Athenæus and others assure us from the best authorities [l]: but notwithstanding this, the letter O doth not appear in the Eugubian tables, nor in the primary Pelasgian alphabet; and if it was not derived from the Phenician *vau*, when sounded as a vowel, I am at a loss to account from what radix it is descended. In some of the old Phenician alphabets, its form is that of the U vowel; and when it was first admitted into the Etruscan alphabet, it was sometimes like the inverted Υ thus ⅄, but more generally like the inverted γ thus Ɔ; however it is certain, that the sound of the long O existed before the addition of the mark Ω to the Attic alphabet, which before was composed of two omikrons thus O O.

THE different powers of Homer's O are proved by Dr. Taylor to be three; namely, O, Ω, and *ou* [m], though I much

[k] See Chishull's *Antiquitates Asiaticæ*, p. 17. n. 31. and p. 19.

[l] Jackson's *Chronological Antiq.* vol. III. p. 166 et seq.

[m] See Dr. Taylor's *Elements of Civil Law*, p. 553, 554, and 555, and Chishull ut supra.



doubt whether these three different characters existed in the Greek alphabet so early as the days of Homer, because Pronopides his master, and also Orpheus and Thymætes of Lacedæmon, who were nearly his contemporaries, used the Pelasgian characters [n].

THE Pelasgian  $\text{D}$  when guttural or hard had the power of K, when soft, that of the  $\Sigma$ . We find that this character, like the Roman C, with a reversed aspect, had the power of  $\Sigma$  near one thousand years before the Christian æra [o], and perhaps this ancient Pelasgian character was the parent of the more modern  $\Sigma$  of the Greeks, although the early colonists who settled in Italy wrote the  $\text{Z}$  as in the alphabet above given, which was continued by the Romans, and is still in use with a reversed aspect.

I SHALL now speak of the aspirated and double letters, namely  $\Theta$ ,  $\Xi$ ,  $\Phi$ ,  $\chi$ , and  $\Psi$ , which appear on the later Pelasgian and Etruscan monuments. The  $\Theta$  is the T aspirated, the  $\Xi$  and the  $\chi$  are said to have been added by *Palamedes*. They are found on some very ancient coins, and in ancient inscriptions. The former of these letters was supplied by the junction of the K with the  $\Sigma$ , and the latter is the Phenician *GH*, which the Etruscans softened into *CH*, as will hereafter appear.

PERHAPS the K of the Eugubian inscriptions may be reckoned among the double letters, as its figure is evidently composed of two distinct parts thus  $\chi$ , which seems to have been originally two distinct elements. The one is the *Yota*, and the other the *Æolic gamma* the parent of the Roman C, and was probably pronounced *CH*, like the C of the modern Italians. We find

[n] *Recherches sur l'Origine &c. des Arts de la Grece*, par Mr. D'Hancarville, vol. II. p. 320.

[o] *Origin and Progress of Writing*, pl. II. p. 66. D'Hancarville ut supra, p. 202. 206. 242. 247. n. 100.



this character signifying *CH*, in the inscription on the stone in the Oscan language abovementioned.

THE derivative letters were introduced into the Pelasgian and Greek alphabets at different periods of time. As those people polished their language, they added new letters or marks for the better and more harmonious conveying the sounds thereof. Several of them must have been introduced long before the practice of writing from left to right was generally adopted, because they are found on many Phenician and Pelasgian coins and inscriptions which are written from the right hand, from whence they have been inserted into the alphabets of those nations, published by several diplomatic writers [*p*]. The Athenians wrote from the right hand, near three centuries and a half after the building of Rome. The descendents of the ancient Pelasgi, and particularly the Samnites, continued to write in this manner till the sixth century after the building of Rome, or till about two hundred and thirty years before Christ, and the Osci still later [*q*], although the Ionians had practised the present mode of writing as early as the third century after the building of Rome.

It has been already observed, that the Eugubian tables have not the letters  $\Gamma$ ,  $\Delta$ ,  $Z$ ,  $O$ ,  $\Upsilon$ , or  $\Omega$ , nor the letters  $\Theta$ ,  $\Xi$ ,  $\Phi$ ,  $X$ , or  $\Psi$ ; whence we may conclude, that they were unknown to the Umbrians when these tables were written.

THE famous Amyclean inscription, which is said to have been written one hundred and sixty years before the siege of Troy, and one thousand three hundred and forty-four before the Christian æra, hath not the  $\Omega$ , but hath two  $OO$  to supply the place of that character, though another inscription of about eight hundred years before Christ hath the  $\Omega$ .

[*p*] See *Nouveau traité de Diplomatique*, vol. I. plate VII. p. 654. and the *Origin and Progress of Writing*, p. 64.

[*q*] See *Monsieur Gebelin*, vol. VI. ut supra.



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THE  $\Xi$  is not in that inscription. It is supplied by the  $\mathbf{K}$  and the  $\Sigma$ , as  $\text{ΕΚΑΛΙΠΑΚΣΑ}$  for  $\text{Ἐκαλιπαῖα}$ , which agrees with the orthography on the shield of Anaxidamus abovementioned, but in the Borgian inscription the  $\Xi$  is represented thus  $\text{†}$ .

THE  $\mathbf{X}$  is not found in the Amyclean and some other very ancient inscriptions; the  $\mathbf{K}$  is substituted for it, as  $\text{ΚΑΑΙΜΑΚΟΞ}$  for  $\text{Καλιμάχος}$ , though in the Borgian inscription and on some Etruscan coins this character is represented thus  $\text{↓}$ .

THE  $\Psi$  doth not appear in the inscription, but is supplied by the  $\Pi$  and the  $\Sigma$ . If the Amyclean inscription is genuine, as several authors have with great strength of argument endeavoured to prove [*r*], it shews that these letters were not known, or at least had not found admittance into the Greek alphabet used in Laconia about a century and a half before the Trojan war.

THE letters  $\mathbf{H}$ ,  $\Phi$ , and  $\mathbf{X}$ , are found on three different inscriptions written about eight hundred years before Christ, and published by the Abbé Fourmont. The same characters appear on the celebrated Sigeian inscription, which was written five hundred and ninety-four years before the Christian æra.

FROM what has been said, I conclude that the original alphabet of the Pelasgians or Etruscans, consisted of twelve radical letters, from whence thirteen more characters or letters were derived.

[*r*] Mem. de l'Acad. des Insc. tom. xxxix. edit. in 12°. p. 129. Gebelin's Mondé Primitif, tom. iii. p. . Nouveau traité de Dipl. tom. i. p. 615 to 626, and Universal Hist. vol. XVI. p. 46. note D, edit. 8vo. and particularly Monsieur D'Hancarville's learned work above quoted.



Radicals.

Derivatives.

Α	Α	
Ε	Ε lengthened or aspirated	Η
Ι	Ι	
Κ	Κ diminished	Τ
Λ	Λ	
Μ	Μ	
Ν	Ν	
Π	Π augmented	Β
Ρ	Ρ	
Σ	Σ augmented	Ζ
Τ	Τ augmented	Δ

Υ

{ Υ or F of the Pelasgi and others.  
U vowel ου or γ, and the O short.  
O O. long or Ω. Ω.

Double and aspirated Letters.

† T aspirated Θ  
‡ Κ Σ joined Ξ  
⌘ ◊ Π aspirated Φ  
Ψ ↓ Gh softened into Ch X  
Π and Σ anciently supplied the Ψ.

It has been shewn that the Pelasgi were of Phenician original, and therefore it is easy to conceive, that their languages were nearly allied to each other. The proximity of the earliest Greek to the oriental languages was well known to Isaac Casaubon, Erpenius, Gebelin, and others. Monsieur Bourguet and father Gori shew, that the language of the Pelasgi differed but little from the Greek: but although their opinions



opinions have been controverted, it must be allowed that the Greeks improved the language of their Pelasgian ancestors to so great a degree, that the elegant orations spoken by Isocrates and Demosthenes, were as different from the harsh dialects of the ancient Pelasgi, as was the English of Addison and Pope, from that of Robert of Gloucester, Occleve, or Chaucer. It is therefore easy to conceive, that the rude language of the ancient Pelasgi was very different from the later or Hellenical Greek.

THE descendents of the Pelasgi who settled in Etruria, Umbria, and in other parts of Italy, were celebrated for their knowledge in the arts and sciences. Both Greeks and Romans sent their youth into Etruria for education. A very interesting account of the learning and writings of the Etruscans is given in the ancient part of the Universal History, vol. XVI. from p. 57 to 62. The best writers agree, that the arts and sciences were very conspicuous in Rome before its citizens had any intercourse with the Greeks, and in these they must have imitated the Etruscans, of whose skill and ingenuity we have so many proofs.

THEIR paintings are admirable, and the colours on their vases, which have been executed above two thousand years, are as perfect as if they had been the works of modern times.

THE Pelasgian or Etruscan language was spoken in the Augustan age, as we learn from Aulus Gellius, and Strabo [s]. It was also patronized by the Emperor Claudius, as appears by a speech of that emperor recorded by Tacitus [t] in which he says, "*Retulit ad senatum super collegio Haruspicum, ne vetustissima Italiae disciplina per desidiā exfolesceret, quam tamen primores Etruriæ adhuc retinebant et in familias propagabant.*" It seems extraordinary, that none of the M. S. S. in the Pelasgian or

[s] Aulus Gellius Noct. Atticæ, l. xi. c. 7. Strabo, l. vii.

[t] Ann. xi. 15.



Etruscan language should have been transmitted to us; for it appears by a passage in Ammianus Marcellinus [u] that the Etruscan records were preserved in the college of Augurs till the middle of the fourth century after Christ; and that the Augurs assisted the emperor Julian with the sacred discipline of their mysteries, by bringing him their books, which were written in the Etruscan letters and language. This was probably done when Julian reformed the Pagan worship.

AFTER the reign of this prince we hear no more of the Etruscan records or M. S. S. for Christianity being re-established in the reign of his successor, and this Pagan learning being offensive to the Christians, they have, and I fear with too much reason, been charged with having destroyed those monuments of ancient learning. This was more the effect of zeal than of prudence; for the Etruscan records could not have contained any thing that would have invalidated the truths of Christianity. However, from this period, the Pelasgian or Etruscan language was intirely disused, and in a short time after was not understood by the inhabitants of Italy.

THE ancient Pelasgian language has been disused for near thirteen centuries; but the study of it has of late become fashionable among the literati, and it has been cultivated with great success by M. Bouguet, the prelate Urbinas, father Gori, Maffei, John Christopher Amadutius, John Baptist Passer, and other illustrious men, as well in Italy, France, and Germany, as by our countryman the late Dr. Swinton, from whose labours it may be collected, that the Pelasgian language and characters are preserved in the monuments which have been called Etruscan, and that every thing relative to the religious, civil, military, and naval establishments among the Romans, was derived from the Etruscans, and the other descendents of the ancient Pelasgi, who settled in different parts of Italy.

[u] Lib. xx. c. 5.



THE Ionians were the first Greeks who turned their letters towards the right hand, and wrote from left to right. Homer was a native of Ionia, where the Pelasgic alphabet was first improved [*x*]; but whether all, or how many of the derivative letters, were introduced into the Greek alphabet in the days of Homer cannot now be ascertained. The Athenians adopted the Ionian letters in the 94th Olympiad or about four hundred and four years before Christ. The Arcadian letters are immediately derived from the improved Ionian alphabet, and the Latin or Roman from the Arcadian.

THE alphabets derived from the Roman are the Lombardic, the Visigothic, the Saxon, the Gallican, the Franco-Gallic or Merovingian, the Teutonic or German, the Carolinian, the Capetian, and the modern Gothic, as I have shewn in the fourth and fifth chapters on the Origin and Progress of Writing.

[*x*] He is said to have written about one hundred and sixty-eight years after the destruction of Troy, or as some will have it, about 907 before Christ.

